Why Newport is Watching Mrs. Douglas' Divorce

Held Down by the Rigid Parsimony of Her Rich Banker Father, the Late Luther Kountze, Will She Now Liven Up Social Life with the Millions She Has Recently Inherited?

Mrs. J. Gordon Douglas and Children at the Newport Horse Show.

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Mr. J. Gordon Douglas.

A Recent Photograph of Mrs. J. Gordon Douglas.

Mrs. Douglas as "Nedda" in a Tableau from "I Pagliacci."

TWELVE years ago the most beautiful debutante of her year, Miss Annie Kountze, daughter of Luther Kountze, the multi-millionaire banker, was married to J. Gordon Douglas, son of the William P. Douglases, of New York. It was a splendid wedding. St. Thomas's Church was crowded with the leaders of fashionable society, and a fortune in gifts was showered on the young people.

From a social and worldly viewpoint it was a perfect marriage. The man had family, social prestige and all the personal traits that make for great social success. The girl came of plain people on her father's side, but her mother was well born, and she had beauty and, of course, a huge fortune at her back.

To-day Mrs. Douglas, still beautiful, the mother of two small sons and heiress to nearly half of her banker father's many millions, is suing Gordon Douglas for an absolute divorce, and all Newport and New York society is on the alert for interesting developments. She asks the custody of her two boys and gives as grounds extreme cruelty, wickedness and failure to provide necessaries.

The first great question agitating Newport is what use Mrs. Douglas will make of her marital freedom and her recent acquisition of the fortune left her by her father, Luther Kountze.

Will Mrs. Douglas, freed at last from a father's parsimony and a husband she had grown to abhor, cut the wide swath socially she has long yearned to do?

Will she take her position in New York and Newport as a lavish hostess and leader in the young married crowd?

Her divorce accomplished, will Mrs. Douglas marry again?

If so, who is the man?

Will she take a large house on the cliffs and a mansion on Fifth avenue and live in accordance with the wealth left her by her father?

The answers to these questions are awaited with keen interest by fashionable New York and Newport.

Society expected all this to happen years ago when she and Douglas were first married. Luther Kountze, however, was then living, a more or less despotic husband and father, who counted every dollar his family spent. Having made every cent of his great fortune he refused to let his family squander it on social frivolities. Of course, he had a famous estate out in New Jersey and lived as a multi-millionaire should.

Mr. Kountze was perfectly willing to spend a fortune to keep this place up, and he was equally willing to make a home here for his daughter and her husband, but he simply would not give her the money to set up a spectacular home and to dress as she wanted to. In many ways a kindly father, he was adamant when it came to placing a large income in his daughter's hand.

But Luther Kountze died a few months ago.

His will left everything to his wife, his son, Major de Lancey Kountze and Mrs. Douglas. His other daughter, Helen, who married Robert Livingstone fourteen years ago, died within a year, leaving no children. So the Kountze wealth is divided in only three parts. Mrs. Douglas receives for the present about ten millions; her mother's share of the estate is to be divided at her death between the son and daughter, so that eventually Mrs. Douglas's share will approximate twenty millions.

Frankly, society has been looking for a divorce in the Douglas family for several years—ever since, in fact, Mr. Kountze's strictness regarding money interfered with their social plans. Before the birth of the second and last child—Sonny is now eight years old—Mrs. Douglas spent a great deal of time away from her husband, and her mother and brother were kept busy patching up affairs between the young people. After Sonny's birth things simmered down somewhat, due, undoubtedly to a large christening check that father Kountze gave his daughter.

Before Sonny's first birthday things were going wrong again, and not even the Kountzes could bring peace to the Douglas menage. By this time Society realized that the key to the whole situation lay in Luther Kountze's hands. The question of money was the crux of the entire matter.

When the Douglases were married, father Kountze provided his daughter with a most elaborate and expensive trousseau. He gave her jewels suitable for her position and continued the dress allowance he had given her as a debutante. Otherwise, he explained, his daughter's expenses were her husband's affair.

Society, of course, did not know this, and when the young people returned from their European wedding trip, and arrived in Newport for the season they were naturally expected to make a real splurge. With their own charm and great popularity, backed by the Kountze millions, the bridal couple would of course take a large house and entertain elaborately.

Alas! Nothing of the sort happened.

The Douglases were simply "visiting round" as they called it. Being popular, they were invited to make several visits with the result that they spent the entire season in Newport with no expense to themselves aside from the necessary tips and such incidentals.

"Never mind," said society, "next Winter they will take a town house and entertain as their position and fortune warrants."

But next Winter came and the Douglases took no house. They did not even take a smart apartment in the Fifth avenue sector. No, they divided their Winter between the Kountze home in Morristown and the Douglas home in New York.

It did not take society many months to understand the true state of affairs in the Douglas household. Every time society asked why Gordon or Annie did not take a house, why they gave no great entertainments, the answer was, "father Kountze."

In a way, society did Mr. Kountze an injustice. He was not stingy for the sake of being unkind and disagreeable, but because he realized the value of money, and also just how hard he had worked for his in the early years of his life. He was born on a small "hard scrabble" farm near Canton, Ohio. His parents were Russian Poles, who had been driven, in 1840, from Poland to make a home in America. Like many of his race he had a keen financial sense. Before his sixteenth year he was turning many an honest penny into an honest dollar.

By 1875, at the age of thirty-five, he was a financial power in the country and consequently of some considerable social importance. Meeting members of the De Lancey and Ward families in a business way he was included in many of their entertainments and speedily placed himself on a solid social basis by marrying Miss Annie Parsons Ward, a descendant of the original De Lancey.

Notwithstanding his social success, Luther Kountze retained all his hard-headed money sense, and while he was overjoyed to have his daughter marry into the aristocratic Douglas family he did not intend to let this marriage cost him a lot of money! Whenever young Mrs. Douglas exceeded her dress allowance and appealed to father for help she was read a homily on extravagance and firmly refused.

Like most fashionable young wives, Mrs. Douglas was fond of beautiful clothes and longed for a continuous round of entertaining. Because of her spectacular beauty and a fascinating way of wearing her clothes, she won a reputation for being the "best dressed woman in Newport." Now, such a reputation costs money, and with all the will in the world, Gordon Douglas could not supply it for his pretty wife. This state of affairs caused constant friction between the young people. Naturally Douglas and his family and friends were bitter toward father Kountze, for they blamed him always for every quarrel.

Mrs. Douglas also blamed her father, but she did not enjoy having her husband and his family abuse him and so the breach gradually widened.

Mrs. Kountze did the best she could for her daughter by having clothes charged to her accounts in the smart shops, but this could not be done too frequently, for father Kountze paid every bill himself.

For three Summers the Douglases succeeded in visiting round among their Newport friends. They grew tired of this, however, and finally, by close managing, they were able to rent a small house round the corner from the Cliffs. Here Mrs. Douglas could entertain from three to six guests for lunch or dinner, but large parties were, of course, impossible. Then her sister-in-law, Sybil Douglas, married into the Fitzhugh Whitehouse family and achieved one of the most charming houses in Newport. This made Mrs. Douglas more unhappy than ever, and, of course, her young husband suffered equally.

About this time Gordon began devoting his days to tennis and his nights to dancing. Mrs. Douglas being left much alone, decided to follow suit, and she speedily became the champion woman tennis player of New York. As for dancing, she introduced a number of sensational dances into Newport, and there were times when rumor said she threatened to take up dancing as a career!

During these years a canker of unrest and tragic unhappiness was eating at Mrs. Douglas's heart. She saw her intimate friends marrying men of wealth and spending fortunes on clothes and entertainments. In New York, when not visiting her in-laws or her own family, she had to put up with a suite at a Madison avenue hotel. Where her friends had Long Island and Newport estates, Fifth avenue mansions and strings of motor cars, she had to be content with a small side-street house in Newport and one electric runabout.

Mrs. Kountze looked on with dismay, but she could not change her husband's lifelong conviction regarding money. When whispers of a possible divorce reached the father's ears, more than one society matron told of a furious scene between the father and daughter. The current report was that Kountze told his daughter that the day she divorced Douglas he would cut off her allowance. He did not intend to have any open scandal in his family if he could help it.

Life was truly hard on this young matron, whose instincts were all for spending money and having a gay social existence. For example, no society benefit, no great ball, no exclusive dinner was ever considered an assured success unless Mrs. Douglas was present. She always acted in the amateur theatrical entertainments, in tableaux and in every form of entertainment given for various charities.

And all this meant a great display of jewels and expensive costumes. At one of the great war benefits she wore a costume almost entirely composed of jewels. For another a noted dressmaker designed an Oriental costume that cost $1,000, not counting the jewels that were almost priceless.

In order to keep up with this pace Mrs. Douglas had to go without many, many things her friends had. It also meant that she had to spend a great many weeks with her relatives in Morristown, where she could economize on living expenses.

While all this feverish straining and anxiety were going on Gordon Douglas was left over much to himself, or, perhaps, he took himself out of the way to please himself! At all events, he began to win renown for other things than tennis and dancing, and he seldom appeared in public with his wife.

When America went to war Douglas entered the army, and eventually went overseas with the Eighty-second Division. Society rather hoped that the trouble between the husband and wife might be smoothed over by the war, but various little happenings of the past Winter made it clear that this would not be. Mrs. Douglas, it was learned, had been keeping a Newport residence since before the war. She made frequent visits to her home there and left her sons there most of the time. Also, she frankly stated that she received no mail from Gordon and did not know his whereabouts.

When the terms of her father's will were read, and it became known that she at last had a large and independent fortune, she let it be understood among her intimates that she would never again live with Gordon. Half a dozen New York bachelors who had hovered in her train and who had helped make life bearable began to be more assiduous in their friendships. All in all, therefore, society was not surprised to learn of the divorce suit.

And this event assured, society began to watch Mrs. Douglas and to wonder as to her future plans. Contrary to report she has not at the moment taken a larger house. She still lives in the Flint cottage on Berkeley avenue, a moderate-sized establishment. But she and her mother, who is spending the season with her, have been considering several houses on Bellevue avenue. And Newport expects her to take one of them and to gratify the social ambitions that have obsessed her for these ten years.

And there is every indication that she intends to do this, but not until her divorce is granted and everything settled in a legal way.

Newport is facing a brilliant season. There is no one matron to lead the gaiety-loving colony. Mrs. Douglas has a wonderful opportunity to become the season's sensation, and society is counting on her for leadership. But will she be contented with solitary leadership? If not, who will be her next matrimonial partner?